

Q: Good afternoon. Today is June 6th, 2019. My name is Clara Silverstein, and I'm here at the Maristhill Center with Rose Marie Boudreau. Together we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that's being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Thank you for joining us today. I'd like to start with having you tell me a little bit about where your family is from, and how they came to live in Newton.

A: Both parents came from Canada, and they came to Newton for work.

Q: Where did they work?

A: My father worked at a grocery store on Watertown Street originally, and my mother worked in the mills.

Q: Okay. Which mill? Was it the one in Nonantum or was it in Watertown?

A: I think it was the Aetna Mill.

Q: Okay. And were you born in Newton?

A: Was I born in Newton? Yes I was.

Q: Okay. And how many children were in your family?

A: I had two brothers and two sisters. I was the youngest of five.

Q: Okay. And what language did you normally speak at home?

A: At home we spoke French.

Q: Okay. And when did you learn English?

A: When I went to school.

Q: Okay. So...did you speak French outside the home, too? Were there a lot of French-speaking people in the neighborhood at the time?

A: Not outside the neighborhood, mostly. Because when I started school, could speak English--that's how we spoke outside. But in the house it was still French. And when we got a little older and we didn't really want to speak French, my father would say, "If you don't want to speak French, you don't talk at all." So, we used to speak French.

Q: Okay. And the school you went to, was it at St. John's, or--?

A: It was--it was called in French Saint Jean l'Evangeliste. And that was a French school, and we had French in the morning and English in the afternoon, or vice versa.

Q: So this was the school affiliated with the church.

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And it was in Nonantum?

A: Yes.

Q: So you walked to school.

A: Oh, we walked everywhere.

Q: Okay, great. Okay. So I'm thinking about a few things that you might remember from your early life in Nonantum, like what street did you live on?

A: What street?

Q: Yeah.

A: I lived on Jasset Street.

Q: Okay. And where did you like to go shopping? Did you go to your father's store, or did you go around in the neighborhood for different things?

A: Well my father had a grocery store, so we did all our food shopping there. But as far as other shopping, as far as clothing and things like that...I don't remember when I was very, very young, but as we got older we would go to Grover Cronin's in Waltham--that was the store to go to.

Q: Okay. And did you need to leave Nonantum much? Was pretty much everything you needed right around you besides--

A: Oh, yeah. Everything was very convenient.

Q: Okay. And where did you like to play? Were there playgrounds?

A: Playground...we spent our summers in the playground. There were two. There was Stearns school on Jasset Street, and then there was Victory Park on California Street.

Q: Okay. Great. Did you have favorite games?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Did you have favorite games or things you liked to do?

A: Oh, gosh. I don't remember, but I do know that I learned how to embroider at Stearns Park.

Q: Okay. Did you go to one of the vacation schools? Because I think they held a school in the summer for people--

A: No. No.

Q: --to learn different things.

A: No.

Q: Okay. So that was just with friends. Can you tell me about a landmark in the area that's important to you? It could be the church, which is no longer there, it could be the library, a particular store--something that really stands out to you.

A: The original church--I don't know if you know this--was on Dalby Street.

Q: Okay.

A: And then that was closed, and they got the church on Watertown Street.

Q: So was the Dalby Street church a small building?

A: It was a smaller church.

Q: Okay, and then they moved--

A: And it became a boys club.

Q: Okay. Interesting. So did you go every Sunday? Was your family very involved?

A: Oh, yeah. Always.

Q: Okay. And I'm thinking about maybe some changes over time, like did you also raise your family in Nonantum?

A: I'm sorry, say that again.

Q: I'm moving ahead in time a little bit--

A: Oh, yeah. I know.

Q: --and wondering at what point you got married and started to raise your own family.

A: I got married in 1949, and my husband was in the service and I was pregnant with my oldest daughter. And when she was born, he was up in Greenland. He was on an icebreaker.

Q: Wow.

A: And he came home when she was about a month old. And then he was in the service until maybe a year after that. He was in World War II and the Korean War.

Q: What military branch?

A: Hm?

Q: What branch of the military?

A: Navy.

Q: Navy, okay.

A: He was a storekeeper, third class.

Q: How did you two meet?

A: In grammar school.

Q: Really?

A: And he was a friend of my brother's. I couldn't get away from him.

Q: So that's kind of fun. You probably didn't expect, you know, when you first met him--sometimes people will say, "Oh, I know I met the person I'm gonna marry." Probably not in your case.

A: I thought I wouldn't--no. It was a big surprise that I was even gonna marry him. But you know, things change.

Q: Right.

A: But I've known him since I was probably ten or twelve, so, y'know.

Q: And when you got your first house, was it right near where your parents were living?

A: Actually, after we got married, we lived upstairs from my parents, on the second floor. And then we outgrew that with my family, so then we moved to Allison Street.

Q: And were you there pretty much the rest--

A: We were there when all of my children were growing up, but then the house across the street was for sale, so we bought that with my daughter and her husband, and--it was a duplex, so she lived on one side and we lived on the other.

Q: So you've had your family around you for most of your life.

A: Forever.

Q: Okay. Right. And you have seven children--

A: I do.

Q: --thirteen grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. That's a lot to be proud of.

A: I think so. They make me proud.

Q: How has the neighborhood changed from when you were little growing up there to when you were raising your children?

A: Well, it was different. People were changing then. I think that--you know, neighborhoods were beginning to change a little bit. At one time we knew everybody on the streets--my street, the next street. Then people were beginning to move, and things changed.

Q: When you started out, was the neighborhood right around you mostly French Canadian?

A: No. The people next door were French. There were a lot of Italian people in the area. I'm trying to think...you know, that's a long time ago. I forget who else...But there were Italians, French, Irish.

Q: And so the kinds of things that your kids did--did they spend a lot of time at the playground and at the church, or were they branching out a bit more?

A: They spend time down at the playground, didn't you Susan? They spent time at the playground. And the boys went to the boys club when they got a little bit older.

Q: Do you remember any special events? I know there's an annual parade in Nonantum now, the St Mary of Carmen Society puts it on? I don't know whether that was going on when you were living--

A: Actually, it was, but I don't know--I don't know who had that parade at the time, but I do know they had a parade. I think it was Memorial Day.

Q: Okay. Now the one--I think the St Mary of Carmen one is in June sometime, maybe July.

A: Yeah. I'm not quite sure of all that.

Q: Were there other special events that took place?

A: In the area?

Q: Yes.

A: Um...whatever they were, I can't think of them at the moment. I don't know.

Q: Okay. Any annual tradition at the church, anything like that?

A: Just not coming to me.

Q: That's fine. There might not have been anything special like that. Right.

A: Oh, right. Oh. Susan just reminded me. At church--when it was on Watertown Street, right?--we used to have a chicken barbecue every year. Yeah. I forgot that, Susan. Thank you. You have to remind me.

Q: So, yeah. There are things that often kind of anchor the year. Do you have any favorite memories from your time growing up in the neighborhood, like, you know, a special day or a special ice cream place, or...?

A: No. The ice cream truck used to come by.

Q: Okay. So it came to you.

A: We would wait for the ice cream truck to come by. If we were lucky, we'd get an ice cream.

Q: Okay. Any special family times? Did you have any special family traditions?

A: Every New Year we would all get together, my family. And when my parents were alive, we would all go to my mother's on New Year's Day--the kids. And then our family became so big, when they got a little bit older, we used to have a time at Post 440 for everyone.

Q: Oh. That's nice. Special foods?

A: Everybody brought food.

Q: Okay. Nice.

A: Yeah. We all brought food.

Q: That's fun.

A: Yeah. It was great.

Q: Do you have any difficult memories? Did something get torn down or change a lot that made you just think about, "Well, this time was not so great."

A: Probably when it was--when World War II started, and all the boys started--all the boys were leaving to go in the service. Both my brothers were in the service, and a lot of fellows in the area. And I was in high school at the time, and I know that we would have a dance every Friday night

at school, and I'll tell you, there were not that many boys there. You know, we only could dance with the kids that were there. If we had other friends, they weren't around.

Q: Yeah. That affected a lot of people.

A: Oh, definitely. Yeah, it was very different then.

Q: What's one of the biggest changes you've seen over time as you were living in Nonantum?

A: Oh, gosh. Well...Can you--give me a clue, Susan. I'm not thinking. Probably families.

Q: Okay.

A: And...

Q: Maybe, I'm thinking like, you know, density, traffic, parking, regulations, anything of that sort.

A: We didn't have cars in those--we didn't have cars. My father had a truck, because he had a grocery store. He had a truck. But we didn't have a car at that time.

Q: So when did you get--

A: Well, when I got married, my father bought a new car. And after I got married, we didn't have a car for quite a while. And my husband never had a new car. He always bought a second-hand car.

Q: And you had one car between the two of you.

A: Oh yes.

Q: Were you working?

A: No, I stayed home with the children.

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: I did not go to work until my youngest daughter went to school all day.

Q: And then what were you doing? What kind of work?

A: I worked in the school system, actually. I worked as a teacher aide. And I started working at Lincoln-Eliot School, and I worked there in the reading lab for ten years. And then they disbanded that, so then I went to Franklin School, and I worked with two hearing impaired boys at one point, and then I worked as a general aide.

Q: So you must have seen a lot of changes in the schools over the years.

A: Well, I did. See, I never went to public school. I only went to parochial school. So, it was different for me.

Q: Yeah. When you went to parochial school, did the boys have a separate school from the girls?

A: Did they have a separate...?

Q: Well, often in a parochial school, the girls and the boys have separate classes. They don't--

A: Oh no, no, no. We were all together.

Q: Okay. Okay. Right. Right.

A: Boys and girls.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Do you think being in Nonantum was a different experience than being in a different part of Newton?

A: I think so. We probably didn't have all the things that people in Newton Centre had, and Newton--West Newton, or...y'know, we lived very simply.

Q: Okay. Right. Is there something you feel that makes Nonantum very unique, besides that, in Newton? You lived simply...

A: We always felt very comfortable there. We never had any worries. We never had any problems. We were safe. I don't know about today, but it was that way then.

Q: Right. Okay. How would you describe Nonantum to somebody who'd never seen it before? Like if you had a cousin or a--you know, somebody living in California, what would you say about it?

A: I can tell them that it's a great place to live. We have everything we need. Everything is very convenient in the area. I don't know. I wouldn't have any doubts about sending somebody there, really.

Q: Okay. Did you ever learn how to drive? You said you didn't have a car earlier in life.

A: Well, I did learn how to drive, but I didn't drive very long. I really didn't like driving in the first place. I was too old when I got my license, first of all. So then my husband got a new car, and he said to me, "Oh, you're not gonna be able to drive that." And I said, "What do you mean?" So I said, "Well, you don't want me to drive your car, then you're gonna have to drive me back and forth to work." So he did. And I didn't drive anymore.

Q: So you had a brief period of driving.

A: Very brief. I drove back and forth to school, that was about it.

Q: Right. Okay. No, because I was thinking you could probably walk to Lincoln-Eliot--

A: Oh, I could walk everywhere. That was the whole point. Even going to high school, when I went to Our Lady, which was on Washington Street, we walked there. And we would go home every day for lunch in 45 minutes--15 minutes to walk home, 15 minutes for lunch, and 15 minutes to get back on time. All kinds of weather. We didn't get a ride. That was different.

Q: Oh, yes. Definitely. Right. What would you want, like, your great-grandchildren to know about growing up in Newton? Like are there stories you like to tell them?

A: Oh...Things were a lot simpler. We didn't have all the opportunities that the children have today. Today, children learn all the sports, they do everything. It wasn't like that.

Q: It seems like your world very much revolved around your family.

A: Yes. And we didn't have to worry. You know, if we had a pair of roller skates, we were lucky. We would go out and roller skate outside, and that was about it.

Q: Right. Okay. I'm interested in the language piece. When you were raising your own children, did you speak French with them?

A: No, not really.

Q: Okay.

A: Now it's very hard for me to try to speak French, because there's no one to talk to in French. And if you don't speak all the time, you really forget. But...no.

Q: Your parents--when they came, you said they came for work, was there not much work for them in Canada?

A: No. No. A lot of people from Canada came to Newton.

Q: Right. And they found the work in the factories, and--okay. Did you see that community sort of dispersing over time?

A: Yes, it did. It did. I suppose like everything else, people move. There were still quite a few French people for a long time. Now there are very few that I know.

Q: When did the church close? Or I guess it merged with Our Lady's. Or around when?

A: You know what, I'm not good with dates, I'll have to tell you right now. I'm not even sure.

Q: Okay. I wonder if that made a difference, after the Saint Jean closed.

A: No, because the people who went to Saint Jean's, all went to Our Lady's from there. Most of them went to Our Lady's, so that I would still see a lot of them at church.

Q: Okay. Were there tensions between the different populations--the Italians, the Irish, the French-Canadians? Did everyone get along?

A: I didn't--we didn't see any of that growing up.

Q: Right.

A: There could have been, but we never had any problems.

Q: Okay. I wonder, now Nonantum has such a strong Italian identity, with the parade and the painting--they've got the stripes, the green, white, and red--

A: Red, white, and green.

Q: --yes, on everything.

A: Yeah, there have always been a lot of Italian people. A lot of Italian people, French people.

Q: Okay. Yeah. So, I'm wondering--we're just about out of time--if there's anything I haven't asked you about that you really want to talk about--things that you remember, things that you're thinking no one else will remember if you don't talk about them.

A: Going back a long time, you know.

Q: Sure, right.

A: I...right now I'm not thinking.

Q: Okay. Well, it's--sometimes an open-ended question that--

A: I'll probably think of it later.

Q: Right, you'll have a great answer once we turn off the recorder. But...I certainly want to thank you for your time, for taking the time to do this with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW